

The background image is a photograph of a forest at dawn. Sunlight is streaming through the trees, creating a warm, golden glow. In the foreground, there are several white flowers, possibly hostas, with green leaves. The title 'Daybreak' is written in a white, cursive font across the upper part of the image.

Daybreak

A short story
Gareth D Jones

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By Gareth D Jones

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Deep in the jungles of Asia a bird ran frantically through the undergrowth. Darkness was near, and the Masters of Night would be out of their dark lair and on his trail. He knew that he could never evade them in the dark. He would be virtually blind while they loved the gloom and could flit through the trees on silent wings, descending on him before he knew it.

How he had managed to escape their caverns he did not know. Many more prisoners had been trapped there, some along with him, others in separate cages or nearby caves. Many were ill, as he was. Some had died while he was there. But why? Capturing their enemies one by one was an inefficient way to fight a war, even for the inscrutable night dwellers.

As darkness descended and the shadows deepened beneath the canopy, he began to recognise his surroundings and a faint glimmer of hope spurred him on to a last spurt of effort. His safe roosting ground was within reach. He called out feebly and, after a moment a reply came to him through the gloom. His clan were near and knew he was back. He was going to be safe.

The aged one flitted through the cavern system, illuminating the way with bursts of sonar that lit his path much more efficiently than any ball of fire in the sky. In truth the aged one pitied the Bringers of Dawn. Without the ball of fire they were blind. They could not go out after dark. The Masters of Night needed no such help to find their way. Even here, underground where no light could penetrate they could navigate unerringly. Soon he entered the Great Cavern where the guano was fresh and the smells of life abounded. He slowed as he approached the alcove where other aged ones gathered, and came to rest on the ceiling.

He waddled forward into the close confines where the aged ones contemplated and conversed, away from the hectic life of the colony. He sent out a series of high squeaks to catch their attention. They parted for him to make his way through to the back of the alcove where the Eldest One clung to the rough surface of the ceiling with the same determination with which he had clung to life for so long.

“What news?” the Eldest One asked with the air of resignation of someone who has asked the same question innumerable times and always received a disappointing answer.

“Success, Eldest,” the aged one said simply. There was a stir of interest among the onlookers, a shifting of positions as they all tuned in their senses to hear the report. The Eldest perked his head up and fixed the news-bearer with a blast of penetrating sonar.

“Success?”

“Indeed. Every captive has succumbed to the new plague.”

“Are you certain? There will be no survivors?”

“Quite certain. We released the first infected enemy a short time ago. By dark he will be safely home and think he has beaten us.”

A murmuring broke out among the gathered old timers, to be cut off by the Eldest.

“You have done well. Your family will be honoured for generations to come. What of your assistants?”

The aged one looked away sadly. “They will all die.”

“Their families too will be honoured.” The Eldest cast a spray of sonar around his audience, fixing the image in his mind, this moment, the dusk of their victory. “Spread the word,” he said. “A new night has begun. Patience for just a little while, then the world will become ours.”

The joyous sounds of the celebrating aged ones faded into the background as the news-bearer made his way back across the caves. A bittersweet victory indeed for those who had brought it about.

In the heart of his clan’s roosting ground, Stonebeak prepared for the dawn. He had been leader of the dawn chorus, and head of the clan, for many seasons. He was invariably the first to stir and was always ready on time as the sky began to lighten in the east. He would harangue and harass the other males to ensure they were ready and each dawn his clan put on a masterful call to bring on the day.

Today though he felt tired. He emerged from his roost to find most of the other males already strutting around in preparation. There were not as many of them as there once had been. The constant battle with the Masters of Dark had taken its toll. More recently several members of the clan had disappeared, captured, it seemed, by their mortal enemies. Brighttail had escaped that captivity, but died only a few days later of a strange illness. Others had complained of a malaise in the following two days, and now Stonebeak felt a

shortness of breath. He wheezed slightly as he made his way to the rocky outcropping that dominated the roosting grounds. He noticed Treeclaw and Blackdown eyeing him speculatively. They were both strong young cockerels and fancied themselves as clan leader. Any sign of weakness from Stonebeak would give them ideas.

The eastern sky was beginning to show the glow of the approaching Sun by the time Stonebeak made his way to the top of the outcropping. He rested for a moment, listening intently for their neighbours to the east, the Bright Forest clan, to begin their heralding call. Treeclaw and Blackdown both positioned themselves on the flanks of the outcropping, attempting to boost their esteem in the eyes of the other males.

The first call from the east could be heard, vaguely, through the intervening trees. The crowing was joined by others of the neighbouring clan as they poured all of their effort into encouraging the Sun above the horizon and bringing another day of safety from the Masters of Dark. A few moments now and the responsibility would fall to Stonebeak to drag the Sun on the next part of its journey across the sky.

The calls from the Bright Forest clan reached a crescendo and began to die away. Next there would be the solitary calls of two or three males that lived independently in the forest. Stonebeak waited. The calls from the east died away. There was silence. Blackdown clucked expectantly, presumptuously. Stonebeak waited a moment more for the lonely forest dwellers. There was nothing. In sudden alarm Stonebeak realised he should commence the dawn chorus, worrying about the missing voices later. Without their encouraging calls the Sun would lose its momentum, stalling below the horizon and leaving them in perpetual dark.

He took a deep breath to begin his crowing, but his chest felt constricted, he couldn't catch enough breath to call forth the Sun. In rising panic Stonebeak stumbled, desperately trying to breath. Blackdown and Treeclaw, the only two close enough to see him in the dull light stared at him in alarm. Stonebeak tried again, but there was just no strength in his body. He could not crow!

With sudden determination Treeclaw leaped from his perch and ran up the short slope to Stonebeak's position. Stonebeak made room for him without hesitation, knowing sadly that his time as leader of the dawn chorus was over. As he reached the peak Treeclaw let out a resounding crow, swiftly followed by the rest of the clan. Blackdown, realising he had lost the initiative, and probably the position of clan leader, joined in with all his might. Personal differences aside, the whole clan, their whole race, was united in their daily task of bringing forth

the Sun.

Stonebeak settled on a ledge, breathing shallowly, and stared through the overhanging branches into the eastern sky. He hoped desperately that his hesitation had not cost them too dearly. After a seemingly endless moment of constant crowing the Sun appeared, ever so slowly, above the horizon. They had succeeded. As the Sun crept higher, its momentum increased by the encouraging calls of Stonebeak's clan, a warm satisfaction crept through his chest. He had spent his life caring for the clan and leading them in their responsibility. His life could end safe in the knowledge that the Sun would continue its journey for another day.

As the dawn chorus around them faded, other calls to the west could be heard. Neighbouring clans and individuals would keep the call going as the Sun made its way across the sky. As Stonebeak made his weary way back to his roost he knew that he would not see its return.

The aged one watched from the edge of a small crevice that led to the isolation caves as the sky began to lighten. He could not endure the brightness for long, certainly not long enough to see the ball of fire itself. In the distance he could hear the accursed calls of the Bringers of Dawn as they encouraged their source of light above the horizon. He turned away in disgust and flitted back into the welcoming darkness of the caves.

Soon the Bringers of Dawn would be no more, then the ball of fire would stop in its course, leaving the forests in permanent darkness. Then the Masters of Dark would be the Masters of Everything. There were no other species to compete with them in the darkness of the night. All of the forest's resources, all of its prey, would be theirs for the taking.

It would take time. A disease did not kill as quickly as a deft strike from a strong flier; but nothing could hide from it either. There was no escape from such an invisible enemy, especially when it was wielded by the Bringers of Dawn themselves.

The aged one thought of the families of his assistants as he flew back towards his resting place. They had been proud when he told them of their success. Proud, but heartbroken. True, many had died in the past during this long struggle for survival. How many had been lost on raids or in fights with the Bringers of Dawn? They may well be an inferior species, but their sharp beaks

and claws were designed for fighting. He flexed his stiff leg as he landed gently at his own small corner of the caves, remembering the long-ago battle that had wounded him, kept him from further raids and led eventually to his work in the isolation caves.

For his assistants it was different. They had been volunteers, knowing they would almost certainly die. Theirs was not the proud death of a warrior, but the slow death of disease. His scouts had scoured the forest for sick and diseased animals of every kind, bringing them back to the isolation caves with the knowledge that any one of those illnesses could infect and kill them too. They had lived apart from their families and the rest of the colony to prevent the spread of disease to their own kind. Just as dangerous had been the capture of a long succession of Bringers of Dawn. It was a far more difficult task than just launching an attack, but they had succeeded. Those captives too had been kept in the isolation caves, incarcerated with sick animals of many species. This had gone on for longer than the aged one cared to remember, until they had eventually come across a sickness that not only spread to the Bringers, but proved fatal.

That fateful night had been the turning point for the aged one and his assistants. They had redoubled their efforts to bring in captives from roosting grounds far and wide. As soon as those captives were definitely ill they had been allowed to escape. Now those escapees were spreading far and wide, and with them went the illness that would finish them off for good.

Blackdown looked around in dismay at the decimated remnants of his clan. The position of leader of the clan was not so prestigious now. All of the surviving members looked to him to solve their problems, but he had no idea what to do. Treeclaw's rule had been brief indeed before he had gone the way of Stonebeak. Others too had caught the illness and gradually died. Some had left the roosting grounds to live solitary lives in the forest where they thought they might be safe. A few had left the area all together, hoping to join another clan, or just to escape the growing menace.

This morning only five cockerels emerged from their roosts to herald the dawn. Blackdown knew that the Bright Forest clan was similarly reduced in number. There were only one or two single voices to be heard to the west. If things continued the way they were, there would be no more Bringers of Dawn.

The Sun would never emerge from below the horizon and night would continue forever. The forest would belong to the Masters of Night.

As the glimmer of dawn began to suffuse the easterly sky, Blackdown and his clan mates made their way to the outcropping to carry out their ancient obligation.

The aged one surveyed the pitiful inhabitants of the isolation caves. Creatures of all kinds lay dead of innumerable causes. Among them several Bringers of Dawn who had succumbed too quickly to be released back to their clans. In one small cave, gathered together for comfort, the last few remaining volunteers. They were terribly sick now, but even so had managed to drag their deceased comrades out of the caves to be returned to nature.

One thing worried the aged one. In one small corner of the cave, where they had constructed a cage of interlocking branches, two Bringers were still alive. They were the only two left in captivity and as yet had shown no sign of illness. They had been exposed to the death and disease just as much as the other victims, yet they had not succumbed. This nagged at the aged one as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. If these two could survive, then others could too. It was too late for most of the local clans. They had already diminished beyond the point where their populations were viable, but somewhere out there some Bringers of Dawn would survive. There may even be enough of them to continue dragging the ball of fire across the sky.

If the Eldest found out it would bring disgrace on all those involved in the project. Their sacrifice would be in vain. The aged one could not allow that. He would have to get rid of the evidence. He was far too old to fight against two Bringers, and all of his assistants were too weak. He swooped down to the floor and waddled awkwardly to the door of the cage. The two Bringers cocked their heads and stared at where they could hear he was. The aged one sniffed in contempt at their blindness, and pulled the series of interlocking branches apart. The door creaked open slightly and the aged one flew back to the safety of the ceiling.

The two Bringers hopped forward cautiously, pushing the door open and stepping slowly into the cave. They sniffed around to trace the source of the fresh air that blew gently in to the caves. The aged one watched in satisfaction as they made their way to freedom. No evidence of his failure remained.

The sky was showing the first signs of light as Blackdown hobbled painfully up to the outcropping in readiness for the dawn chorus. Today it would not be a chorus; Blackdown was alone. A few females peered fearfully from their roosts. Most of them were already ill and the rest did not have long. He wheezed as he began the climb up to the perch where he would crow all by himself. Today it seemed a very long climb as he wheezed and puffed with each painful step.

He barely made it to the top before the faint cry from Bright Forest clan echoed through the trees. It was no longer joined by a great chorus, but merely two or three voices called out to encourage the sun above the horizon. Blackdown felt so weak he was unable to stand. He slumped down onto the cold, hard surface. There were no calls from within the forest, and soon, much quicker than in times past, the calls from Bright Forest died away.

The harsh weight of responsibility settled heavily around Blackdown as he realised that only his voice stood between the dawn of another day or the perpetual dark of night. Unless he could crow, the chain would be broken. Nobody to the west was close enough to have heard Bright Forest's calls. Without Blackdown the Sun would stall. He closed his eyes in despair as he realised that he had no strength left, no breath within him to fulfil his race's ancient responsibility. The disease had the better of him, and his aching body settled farther onto the rocks.

Desperate females watched on in the gloom as Blackdown took his last breath and slid from his perch, tumbling down the rocky slope in a final, humiliating fall from power, to be hidden in the shadows. The dawn chorus had not taken place. There were no more Bringers of Dawn to keep the chain going. The Masters of Night had won. The females looked around nervously at each other, those who were still well enough to care. What was to be done now? For thousands of years their kind had brought forth the Sun for the benefit of many.

Then they began to notice they could make out the shape of Blackdown against the rocks. His outline was becoming clearer, the shadows not so deep.

Slowly, inexorably, the Sun rose.

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About the author:

Gareth D Jones is an environmental scientist and father of 5 from the UK who also writes stories and drinks lots of tea. His stories have appeared in 40 publications and 21 languages. Look out for further stories coming soon from Smashwords.

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